by my side

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by tattooedsiren

Summary

Three days after Jessica fires Mike, Harvey invites Mike to be his plus one for a fundraiser.

Notes

So one random day a fabulous anon left this message in my tumblr ask box: *but what if Jessica fired Mike and there was nothing Harvey could do, so instead he started inviting Mike over to hang out at his office and and his 'plus one' for official parties and such, at first just to annoy Jessica and then because they fell in love*. I thought it was fabulous, and basically couldn't get it out my head. Since it hit one of my fave fic kinks (Mike being fired/quitting/having his secret discovered) a few days later I unsurprisingly found myself starting to write it...

As has become my habit, this is set in a vague AU where only the events of season one happened (so no one knows the truth about Mike).

Eternal love and gratitude to smartalli for being a fabulous beta.

There's something like surprise coloring Mike's face when he opens the door to find Harvey standing there. It's like he never expected to see Harvey again. And okay, it was probably a dick move on Harvey's part, not getting in contact with him after Jessica fired him against Harvey's loud and angry protests. But the truth of the matter is that Harvey needed some time and space to deal with everything that happened, and maybe he should've called or texted Mike to make sure he was okay, but whenever he tried it didn't feel like enough.

So now it's Thursday afternoon and Mike was fired on Monday morning and Mike's looking at him like he honestly thought their relationship was over the second he walked out of Pearson Hardman.

"Hey," Harvey says, tries for once to let as much warmth and affection as he can bleed out through that one little word.

"Hi," Mike says, tentative, like he's unsure and, more to the point, scared about what Harvey is doing here.

"Can I come in?" Harvey asks. He can feel the strain between them, a tension like they've never experienced before, so he figures Mike wouldn't appreciate Harvey just barging in without being asked like he normally did.

Mike silently opens the door wider, and he walks in, stripping off his suit jacket and placing it on the coat hooks on the living room wall before collapsing onto the couch. He looks up to see Mike slowly approaching, seemingly trying to decide whether to join Harvey on the couch or bypass him entirely and sit at the table. Harvey's heartbeat slows in relief when Mike joins him on the couch.

"How are you doing?" Harvey asks.

Mike nods. "Yeah, great," he replies, not a little sarcastically.

Harvey gives him a quick once over. He looks tired, pale, unshaven and ruffled. He doesn't think it's a stretch to imagine that Mike's shut himself away in this apartment for the last few days.

"I am sorry, you know," he says, because he is, and he doesn't think that Mike knows it.

Mike shrugs, putting so little effort into the gesture he only uses one shoulder. He looks so deflated, and Harvey hates it, hates that Mike’s spark, present since the day they’d met, is gone. He's never seen Mike

like this, not even when he was dealing with Trevor being an ass or his grandmother dying or any of the other lows Mike has had since they met. It has taken losing this job to bring him so low, and any doubt Harvey had about his plan disappears out the nearest window.

"It's not your fault," Mike tells him. His voice is soft but he sounds certain, like he honestly doesn't harbor any kind of grudge against Harvey for what happened.

"I should've fought harder for you," Harvey says, eyes heavy on his hands where they twist together, unable to meet Mike's eyes with the shame coursing through his veins. Because it's true. While he certainly didn't roll over and let Jessica fire Mike without a word, he should've done something, *anything*, to get her to not take Mike away. He should've threatened or blackmailed or offered some kind of ultimatum that meant he could keep Mike by his side. But it all happened so fast, and his arrogance the last three years meant that he genuinely never considered the possibility that they'd get caught, so he hadn't thought of any kind of backup plan or exit strategy. He was completely blindsided.

When Harvey chances a look up at Mike, still sitting there silent despite Harvey's proclamation, it's to find the younger man staring at him, open and unabashed. He wants to look away but he can't.

"What are you doing here, Harvey?" Mike asks at last.

Harvey takes a deep breath. "I wanted to see if you were busy tonight," he says, then immediately winces. Mike just got fired so he has no job, and he lost what few friends and family he had during his tenure at Pearson Hardman, so it's not likely that he has plans to do anything.

Mike rolls his eyes. "Not anymore," he says dryly.

"Well, I was wondering if you wanna come with me tonight."

Mike was supposed to be attending the fundraiser. Harvey was going, along with Jessica and a few of the senior partners, to represent their firm and show how magnanimous they could be (while trying to woo every millionaire in attendance and get their business). Mike, as Harvey's right hand man, was supposed to be there. Until he got fired, that is. But Harvey still had his plus one ticket, and right now, he couldn't think of anyone he'd rather take with him.

"What about the model slash actress slash heiress du jour?" Mike asks.

Harvey shrugs nonchalantly, like he's bored by them or something. But this doesn't seem to be enough for Mike. He sits up straighter, looks Harvey square in the eye. "Harvey, why do you want me to come with you?"

Because I still want you in my life, he thinks, but can't bring himself to say. "Because I want to see Jessica's face when I show up with you by my side."

He probably shouldn't be putting Mike so directly in the line of fire between him and Jessica, should keep Mike protected and not put him right in the middle of things. But Jessica did that first. She did what she did with no regard for what Harvey wanted or needed. He's not above trying to seek a bit of revenge for that.

And clearly Mike likes the idea of vengeance too, because for the first time all night, Harvey sees something like a smile.

Harvey's still half convinced that Mike won't show.

It's all well and good to talk about doing something, but actually having the balls to go through with it is something else. But then the crowds seem to part, and Mike's standing there in the tuxedo Harvey made him get last year after Mike showed up to a Harvard gala dinner in a rented tux. He looks clean shaven. More than that, in fact. When Harvey approaches he can see that he's had a haircut too

Mike smiles softly at Harvey's approach, and, because he apparently takes complete leave of his senses, when Harvey gets to him he runs a hand through Mike's freshly shorn locks. But Mike doesn't flinch or back away.

"Looks good," Harvey tells him, nonchalantly, like it was a matter of fact and not opinion, hand falling back down to his side.

"Thanks," Mike says, and he runs his own hand through his short hair. "Fresh start, you know?"

Harvey nods. He's had a few of those himself over the years, his hair going from blond to brown, long to short. It certainly helped him to get refreshed or to move on or whatever he felt needed to be done.

A waiter appears at their side, so Harvey picks up two glasses of champagne and hands one to Mike. Harvey takes a sip, and can't help but notice that Mike's hand shakes slightly when he takes a drink.

"You're not nervous, are you?" Harvey teases. Because Mike, for all his naïveté and social bumbling when they first met, has been to many parties and functions during his time at Pearson Hardman, and learned quickly, even more quickly than Harvey had expected, how to behave and what to talk about and how to woo a client who doesn't know they're being wooed.

Mike downs the rest of his drink, putting the empty glass on the tray of a passing waiter. He shoves his hands into his pockets, presumably so Harvey can't see if they're still shaking or not. "I just don't know what I'm doing here, Harvey."

Harvey takes a small step closer, puts a hand on Mike's lower back. "You're here to enjoy the free food and drink. You're here because I want you with me. You're here so we can show Jessica that we don't agree with what she did. Take your pick."

Mike smiles faintly. "Okay," he says, and Harvey doesn’t know which reason Mike chooses and to be honest, in this moment, he doesn't care. Because Mike is here, and it looks like he's staying, and for now, that's enough.

They start mingling. Mike manages to get back into the swing of it. Harvey helps as best he can, asking Mike questions for the express purpose of allowing Mike to answer with amazingly specific and detailed information, which obviously impresses whoever they're talking with. It feels like old times, only this time Mike's impressing them with his knowledge of the works of Faulkner or the history of the printing press instead of the ins and outs of a company's bi-laws or the American constitution.

He sticks pretty closely to Mike's side all night (or does Mike stick closely to his? Harvey couldn't say for sure). He's tactile in a way he's never been before, because Mike is, for the lack of a better word, his date. Mike is his plus one, even though this time last week Mike was going to be attending this party anyway. But they aren't colleagues anymore, and Mike's not here because it's his job, he's here because he wants to be.

Mike shifts close to Harvey's side, turns his head and presses his mouth close to Harvey's ear as he whispers, "Jessica's here, she's seen

us."

Mike moves his attention back to the pretty blonde standing on his other side while Harvey takes a moment before slowly looking up and across the room. He meets Jessica's eyes. She looks *pissed*. Harvey just grins at her, completely unabashed, before returning his attention to Mike and their group's conversation.

"So?" Mike asks, several minutes later, as they cross the room to the bar.

"She wasn't happy," Harvey tells him.

"Good," Mike grins, but it's hard, and it doesn't look right on his face.

Harvey doesn't blame him. Harvey's still pissed too, and he wasn't the one who lost his job and his income and everything else that Mike gained by working at Pearson Hardman. If anyone's entitled to bitterness, it's Mike. But Harvey doesn't like it, because it's not the Mike he knows. The Mike he knows is open and forgiving to a fault (case in point: Trevor) and he hates the roughened edges Mike has now.

"Come on," Harvey says, hand hooking around Mike's elbow as he pulls him in the opposite direction, suddenly needing to get out of here. "Let's get some air."

Mike doesn't protest, lets Harvey drag him to wherever he chooses. The gala is being held in a hotel ballroom, and Harvey has a choice between left to the elevators which would take them to the rooftop garden, or right through the lobby to the street and city beyond.

Harvey turns right.

When they make it outside there's a cab waiting. But Harvey's not quite ready to end the night yet. "Did you wanna go for a nightcap somewhere? Or just go for a walk, get some fresh air?"

"Actually, I'm kinda beat," Mike says, hand rubbing at the back of his neck. "Do you mind if we call it a night?"

"Of course not," Harvey says, smiling through the lie. "Come on, I'll drop you home."

They climb into the cab and Harvey gives the driver Mike's address.

"Thanks for coming tonight," Harvey says in the dark of the cab, the lights of the city flying past the window.

"Sure," Mike says, a little too non-committal for Harvey's liking.

"Did you have a good time?"

Harvey turns his attention to Mike in time to see the younger man smiling slightly. "Yeah."

It's silent the rest of the ride, and Harvey spends the whole time wanting to say something, but just not knowing *what.* And Mike just sits there, like the silence is completely fine and normal, like he doesn't want or need anything more.

When they pull up to the curb outside Mike's apartment building, Mike doesn't even hesitate, unbuckling his seatbelt and saying goodnight to Harvey before getting out of the car and walking inside without looking back. Harvey gives the driver his address and tries to ignore the weird feeling of emptiness sitting in his stomach.

No one would ever accuse Harvey of being the most emotionally aware person, but even he feels like an asshole when it takes him to the next day to realize that for all the hours he and Mike spent together the day before, not once did they really talk about anything of actual importance. He didn't ask Mike how he was coping, what his plans were, if he had any thoughts about his future...

He feels genuinely horrible for abandoning Mike like that. He might not have been able to save Mike like he so desperately wanted to, but then to not call him or see him for days, and then to not ask how he was doing when they finally did see each other, feels like an even greater betrayal.

The truth is, now that they aren't working together, he still wants some kind of relationship with Mike. He just doesn't know how to go about making that happen. Because they were boss and subordinate and now they're not and that's going to affect their dynamic. Because he works ridiculous hours, barely has time to sleep outside of work, and apart from his brother, there is no one in his life he considers important that doesn't work at Pearson Hardman, as it's damn near impossible to maintain any kind of relationship with someone who

doesn't share the same insane work hours. Because it's not like he can just call up Mike and invite him to a movie or something, not when he spent so long trying to set boundaries between them. He doesn't know how to navigate this, how they can still be *Harvey and Mike* in these new circumstances. But the alternative, where Mike's no longer a part of his life, where he's no longer a part of Mike's, is unacceptable.

So he picks up the phone and calls.

"Hey," Mike says when he answers, warm and open, and the sound makes itself a nice home in Harvey's chest.

"Hi. How are you?"

"Fine. What's up?"

Harvey can't help the smile the tugs at his lips. "I wanted to see if you were free for lunch today."

There's a brief pause before Mike answers, a little regretfully, "Actually I have plans already."

"Okay," Harvey says, not giving up that easily. "What about dinner?"

The silence stretches out even longer this time. Finally Mike replies with an anxious, "Harvey, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Harvey asks, all innocence.

"In the three years we've known each other we've never once had a lunch *or* dinner together that wasn't work related. So, what's going on?"

"Nothing. I just thought we should talk, about everything that happened."

Yet more silence. "There's nothing to talk about," Mike insists, tone clipped.

"Really? That's what you're going with here?"

"Yup."

Harvey looks up at the sound of someone entering his office. Jessica. She stands on the other side of his desk, waiting patiently. To anyone else she might look completely neutral, maybe even bored, but Harvey can see past that. He sees the simmering rage lurking below the

surface, and he knows exactly why she's here.

"Okay, how about this then. What are you doing tomorrow night?"

"I think you know the answer to that question."

"Feel like being my plus one to Wyatt's product launch?"

Mike chuckles. "You're not going to give up, are you?"

Harvey grins. "Never."

He can hear Mike take a deep breath before he says, "Okay, Harvey, I'll be your plus one."

"Good." Harvey glances at Jessica, still waiting for him. "Look, Jessica's here. I gotta go."

Mike actually laughs, and Harvey smiles at the sound. "And how long has she been standing there waiting for you to get off the phone?"

"I think you know the answer to that question," Harvey tells him, very deliberately throwing Mike's statement back at him.

"Does she look annoyed?" Mike asks, hopefully.

"Not yet, but give it a few minutes."

"Good. Well, enjoy."

"Will do. I'll see you tomorrow. Pick you up at seven, okay."

"Bye, Harvey."

"Bye, Mike," he says, before putting down the handset and looking up expectantly at Jessica. "What can I do for you?" he asks nonchalantly, like he doesn't know exactly why she's standing in his office.

"What the hell are you doing, Harvey?" she demands.

Harvey looks around, like he's confused by the question. "Um, working my ass off and earning you a lot of money?"

"Don't play dumb with me. What are you doing with Mike Ross?"

"First of all, I'm not sure it's any of your business. And second of all, why do you care?"

"I want that kid out of our lives, Harvey. He's dangerous. I fired him to save you and every other employee at this firm. You need to stay away from him."

Harvey stands, barely able to keep his seething anger at bay. "Look, Jessica, you're the manager of this firm, it's your prerogative to hire and fire staff at will. But that doesn't mean I have to agree with your decisions, and it certainly doesn't mean I have to be okay with them. You can't tell me I can't have a relationship with an ex-employee."

Jessica just stands there scrutinizing him. "And exactly what *type* of relationship do you two have?"

Harvey isn't going to rise to the obvious bait. "Right now, the type where we're just trying to figure out if and how we can be part of each other's lives." He takes a deep breath. "You can tell me do a lot of things for you and this firm. But not this."

Jessica just glares at him for a moment before turning and walking away. Harvey doesn't think this is the last he'll hear on the topic.

"Mike!" Wyatt calls when he and Harvey walk into the room.

Mike grins and shakes his hand warmly, accepting Wyatt's enthusiastic hug with ease. Harvey watches on amused, shaking Wyatt's hand when they're done greeting each other.

"How're you feeling?" Harvey asks with a grin as Wyatt practically vibrates with excitement before him.

"I'm feeling good, you know. Excited. It's going to do well. It will do well, won't it? Oh god, what if it completely crashes..."

"Hey," Mike says, stepping forward and gripping his arms tightly. "It's gonna be great."

Wyatt nods, a little erratically. "Yeah. Yeah you're right. Thanks, Mike."

Mike smiles warmly at him. "Go, kick some ass."

They watch Wyatt disappear into the crowd, looking slightly more at ease with the world around him. Even after all this time it still

surprises Harvey. He'd jokingly called Mike *the client whisperer* once, and Mike had laughed and dismissed the whole idea. But there really was something about Mike that put people at ease. It was completely innate, and no matter how hard Harvey might try and mimic him (not that he did too often, because even if it wasn't completely against his nature, he had Mike for that anyway) it never really worked as well.

"Come on, let's get a drink," Harvey says, and they make their way to the bar.

They grab a couple of long necks and find a spare couch to lounge on. The atmosphere is relaxed and casual. Pop music plays over the speakers, completely overpowering the screens placed around the room which continuously play a product video. Everyone is dressed in neat casual – Harvey is sans tie – and when a waiter offers them some food the first thing Mike grabs is a pig in blanket.

"Now why couldn't all the work parties we went to be like this?" Mike says around a mouth of food.

Harvey can't help but laugh. Mike definitely looks relaxed, content. And though he feels a bit exposed without his usual Tom Ford armor on, the feeling is contagious. He smiles easily, and despite the fact that there aren't a lot of people here who he should make an effort of networking with, he knows he should still go and talk to the few who are present. But he doesn't want to. He just wants to stay here and talk about nothing with Mike and, just for once, be able to take a moment to breathe.

They barely even move from the one spot for an hour, until Wyatt comes over and introduces them to a few of his staff. There's food and drink and talking, and then the group creates a makeshift dance floor, dragging Mike along with them. Mike glances back at Harvey like he's expecting Harvey to save him, but Harvey just laughs and lets them go. It's the right decision, because despite Mike's initial protests it takes less than a minute for him to start dancing like an idiot.

Harvey figures now is as good a time as any to get in the minimum amount of networking required to justify this as a work evening. He makes the rounds, and ends up chatting with Wyatt's second for a while. They've been talking for about ten minutes when Mike appears at his side, flushed and smiling. Mike joins the conversation, and they chat happily until Wyatt calls Bruno away and they're left alone.

Harvey knows he and Mike should have that conversation, knows they

need to talk about what happened. But Mike looks relaxed and happy and Harvey can't bring himself to break the casual ease of the evening by bringing up such a serious topic. So despite his promise to Mike that he wasn't going to let this go, he does.

For now, at least.

When Harvey calls Mike, the younger man literally answers the phone with, "So, what event do you need a plus one for now?"

Harvey chuckles, head ducked low even though there's no one there to see him. "Nelson Corp's annual 'look how successful and powerful we are don't you wish you were this awesome' party."

"Is that the official name?" Mike deadpans.

"You should see the invitation," Harvey replies with equal seriousness, and he can hear Mike chuckling.

"Alright, give me the details."

"Friday night, eight o'clock, Plaza Hotel."

"Please tell me I don't have to wear a tux."

"You don't have to wear a tux." Harvey can practically hear Mike's exhale of relief. "One of your ridiculously skinny suits will suffice."

"Come on, you love them," Mike teases, and Harvey will never *ever* tell him the truth: that for all Harvey gives him crap for his thin lapels and skinny ties, they actually do suit him, and seeing Mike in one of his own suits would be really peculiar (because the suit dimensions just wouldn't work on his lithe frame – and he refuses to let his mind linger on the idea of Mike wearing his suit because it makes him nervous for reasons he's not really ready to discern).

"No comment," Harvey tells him, which is as good as an admission, and Harvey waits for Mike to take the opening and run with it. But he doesn't. In fact, the line is silent for a few moments before Mike speaks again, his voice slightly terse.

"Okay, I'll see you Friday, Harvey," he says, hanging up before Harvey can even get in a brief farewell.

Harvey just looks at the handset for a moment, confused, chaotic mind trying to backtrack and figure out just what the hell happened, but he gets nowhere fast. So he hangs up the phone and decides if he can't figure it out then he won't think about it at all, getting back to work

Harvey would never admit to being nervous about how things were going to be between them given Mike's abrupt ending to their phone call earlier in the week. But if he *was* nervous (and for the record, he wasn't, okay?) then the metaphorical nerves melt the second Mike greets him with a wide smile.

Suddenly overcome with the desire to reach out and touch Mike, Harvey instead shoves his hands deep into his pockets when Mike stops by his side.

"Ready?" Mike asks, and Harvey just nods as they head inside.

Mike really does make an amazing plus one. He's part colleague, part date, part wingman, and the combination really shouldn't work or even make sense, but it does.

Mike converses easily with everyone. He gets Harvey a drink whenever his glass gets low. He pulls Harvey away whenever he can tell he's looking for an excuse to leave. He introduces Harvey to the stunning women he meets (and Mike presents Harvey with a rather glowing intro before leaving them to talk). He drags Harvey across the room to where Mike's just met some big hotshot with whom he's bonded over biking or books or something incredibly average and simple. Whenever they attended events together back when Mike was his associate he was never this comfortable or outgoing, even when it was practically his job description to be so. But maybe, because Mike doesn't have anything to lose now, he feels freer to be himself. And, unsurprisingly, that works better for him.

However the ease in Mike's countenance disappears like a shot when they're talking with Nermin and he asks Mike how life at Pearson Hardman is treating him. Mike's face falls and Harvey can see Mike struggling to form an answer, so he hooks a hand around Mike's arm and says to Nermin, "Will you excuse us for a moment?", not even waiting for an answer before he drags Mike away.

Mike's head is hung low as they walk away, and Harvey briefly cups a

hand around the back of his neck, squeezing reassuringly. "Go grab a seat," Harvey tells him, pointing to a vacant table in the corner. "I'll grab us some drinks."

Mike nods, his face which was so lively mere moments before now completely blank. Harvey goes to the bar and gets them both a scotch. He knows it's not Mike's alcoholic drink of choice, but given that Harvey's about to start a conversation they've both been avoiding for over a week, he figures they could both use it.

He places the tumbler on the table in front of Mike with a soft, "Drink up."

Mike does, taking a long and careful sip of the drink before putting it back down on the table. His hands immediately go to his lap, where they wring nervously.

"Are you ready to talk about this?" Harvey asks.

Mike laughs, short and without humor. "Would it matter if I wasn't?" he asks, looking up at Harvey.

"No," Harvey admits, because they need to talk about this. They've left it too long already, and it might be painful, but Harvey thinks the longer they leave it the worse it will be. "Talk to me."

"What's there to say? I got found out, and Jessica fired me for it. It's not like we didn’t know that this was how everything was going to end the day you hired me."

"You can say whatever you want to say, Mike. That's the point. Bitch, yell, rage, call me names, tell me you hate me. Just talk."

Harvey knows Mike, knows that whenever something major happens he will either spill every thought and feeling he has or completely shut down and say next to nothing. In the years they've known each other he's seen Mike take both options. He never knows which one he's going to get.

When Mike remains silent, it becomes obvious that this is going to be an Option B situation. And that's fine, if Mike doesn't want to talk about it, Harvey won't force him. It's enough, he thinks, for Mike to know he's here for him if he ever changes his mind.

"Have you thought about what you're going to do next?" Harvey asks, when the silence stretches on long enough for Harvey to be certain

Mike doesn't want to talk about his leaving Pearson Hardman.

Mike shakes his head.

"You could come work for me," Harvey offers.

Mike's lips quirk into a faint smile. "I think that ship has sailed, Harvey."

"Okay, maybe not as my Associate, but we could find another way. I could pay you for legal consultation or something."

Mike just looks at him, long and hard, and when Mike eventually speaks he sounds genuinely curious. "Let me ask you something. Would you do this for anyone but me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, would you ever, in any other circumstance, hire a legal consultant? You've got the resources of a multi-million dollar company behind you, with lawyers and paralegals and researchers available at the drop of a hat. Why pay someone else on top of that? Is there anyone on this planet you would hire for that role other than me?"

Harvey doesn't say anything, and if Mike's expression is any indication, his silence is saying more than enough. Mike's looking at him like he knows he's right, but what bothers Harvey is why all of a sudden Mike's acting like this is a *bad* thing. Mike has basically been trying to worm his way into Harvey's life since the moment they met. Now that Harvey's opening that door for him, why isn't he walking though it? Or, more to the point, why does he seem like he's mad that Harvey's opening that door to begin with?

"Look," Mike says on a deep exhale, resting a hand gently on Harvey's forearm, "don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't appreciate the offer. I do. But I think I've been depending on you too hard, and it's not fair, to either of us. The truth is, I have no idea what I'm going to do next. But I think I need to figure it out by myself for once."

The *for once* catches in his mind, and Harvey suddenly thinks of Trevor, the way he continually dragged Mike down for years upon years until he had the strength to cut him off. Harvey doesn't want to have even the vaguest resemblance to that leech, and though he doesn't think Mike means to lump them together in that way, he basically has. He's saying that Harvey has the power to control his life to the same extent Trevor did, and though he's vaguely flattered by

the idea of Mike caring that much about his opinions, he doesn't want that for either of them. He doesn't want to control Mike in any way, doesn’t want to force Mike into any situation he doesn't want to be in. He wants Mike, as trite as it sounds, to be happy. Of course he hopes that he can be a part of that in some capacity, but ultimately this isn't about him, it's about Mike.

"Okay. Just ... promise me that if you ever need anything, that you'll ask."

Mike smiles softly at him. "Promise."

"Good weekend, boss?" Donna asks, sitting herself down opposite Harvey at his desk.

"Always," Harvey smirks.

Donna just smiles in return before turning her attention to the stack of paperwork she brought in with her. "Okay, so your week is starting to fill up already. Jessica dropped these off for you," she hands over two thick manila folders, which Harvey takes and flips open. He skims the first page, immediately realizes it's pro-bono, and when he looks up to Donna ready to protest, she just says, "Sorry, Jessica's orders, no getting out of it."

He tosses the folders onto his desk. "She's still punishing me for Mike, isn't she?"

Donna doesn’t know about Mike being his perpetual plus one (she hasn't figured it out yet, and because he still hasn't worked out what it all means, he's been in no rush to enlighten her) but she was there when it all went down. She heard everything when Jessica came into his office and told them that one of the Associates had brought their concerns about Mike's legitimacy to her, since neither they nor anyone they knew could remember Mike from Harvard. Jessica didn't want to believe it, but was obligated to follow up, and in doing so, she couldn't find any professors that remembered Mike, no photos of him on campus or copies of his work. Indeed, she couldn't find anything other than his final JD that proved Mike attended. She couldn't even find any evidence of Mike's pre-law degree, at which point Mike told Jessica that it was true, that he lied, that not even Harvey knew the truth.

Donna nods. "I don't think she bought Mike's story that you didn't know. And she figures that even if you didn't know you probably should have, so..." she waves her hand at the pro-bono files to fully illustrate the cause and effect.

Harvey lets out a deep sigh. "Well, I suppose all things considered, it could've been worse."

"How?" Donna asks, disbelieving.

Harvey takes a moment to think about that. It's true; things are pretty fucking bleak right now. He lost Mike, and he lost the relationship he had with Jessica. He feels that loss acutely. Jessica also took away his bonuses for the foreseeable future and stopped subsidizing his car service and a few of the other perks he had. But Jessica didn't take Donna away, or fire Harvey, so there's that.

"She could've taken you away too," Harvey points out, and Donna smiles warmly at him.

"It's cute when you're sentimental," she teases.

"Okay, can we get back to work now?" Harvey asks, because he is so done talking about his emotions.

Donna laughs. "Sure." She stands and starts to head out of the office, before she turns on her heel, fingers clicking as she clearly remembers something. "Oh, by the way, Langbroek has sent his invites out but I assume you don't wanna go."

Harvey thinks about it for about two seconds. "No, it's fine, I haven't gone to his last three, I should probably put in an appearance. Tell him I'll be there, plus one."

Donna nods. Harvey's fingers twitch with the need to call Mike and invite him, a need only sated when Harvey picks up the phone and calls.

Harvey discovered early on that one of the perks of his job was getting to see New York in a way that too few people did. Because in what other circumstance would he have a near private viewing of Picasso's *Nude Standing by the Sea* at the Met?

It's different, standing in an empty and silent gallery. The last time he was here was a few years ago, and he remembers trying to take everything in but having the noise and sheer volume of people completely souring the experience. But now, because Langbroek decided the best way to show off his wealth and influence was to have his party in the Modern and Contemporary Art wing of the Met, he can wander the gallery in peace.

So he does, looking at the Picasso's and Matisse's and Gris' to his heart's content. He can hear the muted buzz of the party at the other end of the floor, but he doesn't think anyone will mind his brief absence. He, with Mike's help, had put in a solid hour of schmoozing, and he's certain he'll get a call from a potential client about signing with them in the morning, so he figures he deserves a brief respite. He's been looking at the pieces for probably about ten minutes when Mike finds him. He can hear his footsteps as he approaches, and when Mike arrives at his side he says, "You know, I never really thought of you as an art guy, but then I remembered that ridiculous picture in your office. Figured I'd find you here."

"What can I say, I'm a complicated guy," Harvey grins.

Mike looks at him like he thinks Harvey isn't that complicated at all. He then turns his attention to the Picasso, steps forward slightly to get a closer look. The blue of the painting seems unbelievably bright, even in contrast to the blue of Mike's eyes as he takes it all in.

"Interesting," Mike murmurs.

"You like it?"

"Yeah," Mike smiles softly as he steps back again. "You?"

"I do. I mean, it's no Chinese Panda, but it's pretty close."

There is a brief pause before Mike laughs, his whole face lighting up with amusement. "Asshole," he says lightly, grinning around the word.

They move to the next painting but barely get a chance to look at it before Harvey hears approaching footfalls. He looks up to see Jessica advancing towards them. She looks angry and harried, and Harvey mentally prepares himself for Jessica's wrath. Whatever happens, he's not going to apologize for bringing Mike. She can hate it all she wants, but she can't make Harvey cut Mike off completely.

Mike finally looks away from the painting to see Jessica. Whether he

heard her footsteps or could feel Harvey tense beside him, Harvey doesn't know. He chances a quick look back at Harvey, and the older man steps closer to his side, a subtle message that Harvey is on Mike's side, no matter what.

"Harvey, we need to go," she says when she approaches, not even looking at Mike.

"Look, Jessica, if this is about-"

Jessica waves her hand. "It's not. Believe it or not, not everything is about the two of you. It's Spiteri. He's been arrested."

"For what?" Harvey asks, in complete shock.

Jessica very carefully turns her gaze to Mike as she replies, "Fraud."

Harvey doesn't think he imagines the way Mike inches closer to his side, but he doesn't look away from her heavy stare. As much as it pains him to leave, he really needs to get Jessica and Mike away from each other and deal with this right away.

"Okay," Harvey says to Jessica. He turns to Mike, apologetic. "Sorry, Mike, but I have to go deal with this."

"Of course. Don't worry about me. Go, be awesome."

Harvey can't help but smile at that, and he briefly squeezes Mike's arm before he and Jessica walk away.

Harvey's life basically becomes insane overnight. There's trying to fight against Spiteri's charges, a merger that goes sour at the last minute, a pro-bono case that goes much longer than anticipated and a wrongful termination suit that is going nowhere fast.

To that end, he doesn't see or even speak to Mike in a couple of weeks. He's had no events that required his presence, and even if did, he wouldn't have had the time to attend anyway.

The way he misses Mike is twofold. He misses Mike as his Associate, the ease he felt whenever Mike was around, the safety he felt knowing Mike had his back, the way Mike's sharp mind made him lift his game and made him better. And he also misses the Mike he's been getting to

know through this new relationship they've been tentatively building. It hasn't been easy, going from boss and subordinate to something like friends. And he worries that breaking off the momentum they've found, by not seeing each for so long, could leave everything they are, everything they could be, crumbled in a heap.

Obviously he could just pick up the phone and call, but it feels like they've settled into this pattern where Mike is his plus one, and he doesn't know if Mike would welcome him breaking out of that routine. Because it's not like Mike's contacted him since he left either. Maybe he doesn't care about still being in Harvey's life, now that there's nothing to bind them together. The truth is, without their jobs and Mike's secret, the want to be so is the only thing that will keep them in each other's lives.

Whenever he feels this way, which is more often than he likes, he thinks about calling Mike. But he honestly doesn't know what Mike wants. At times he can't believe that Mike doesn't want them to remain friends, because Mike tried to worm his way into every aspect of Harvey's life since the day they met. And yet, he's not doing anything himself to ensure their relationship doesn't just fade into nothingness.

He thinks about Mike, usually in the later hours, when the office is dark and deserted and Harvey feels his absence more acutely, and he contemplates picking up the phone and calling. But he never knows what to say, so in the end, says nothing.

Harvey is buried elbow deep in paperwork, sitting at the glass table in the corner of his office because he had more room to spread out than at his desk, when the sound of tapping on glass drags his attention from the sea of white paper before him. He looks up, astonished to see Mike closing the door behind him, smiling shyly at Harvey. He's dressed casually - in a grey t-shirt, blue jeans, and red Chucks - as if he wanted to stand out, like he was unashamed to be different from all the sharply dressed men and women strutting the halls of Pearson Hardman. Or maybe he just knew that, no matter what he wore, coming back here for the first time after being fired, he'd stand out no matter what he wore, and at least this way he'd be comfortable.

"What are you doing here?" Harvey asks, incredulous.

Mike holds up the bag of Thai food in his hand. "I was in the neighborhood, figured you probably wouldn't have eaten yet. If memory serves you pretty much don't eat anything until someone forces you, so, here I am, forcing you."

He's right of course, Harvey hadn't eaten yet. In fact, he could count on one hand the amount of times he'd had lunch at work since Mike's departure over a month previous. Without Mike there bugging him about it, most days he simply forgot.

Harvey is grinning when he stands from the table. Mike heads over to the couch, collapsing onto it with ease. They pull out the containers, and Harvey can't help but note that Mike got his favorite dish. It shouldn't be surprising, and even more importantly, it shouldn't mean as much. But Mike has shown up here with Harvey's favorite food because he knew Harvey wouldn't be eating without it, after weeks of radio silence because Harvey couldn't figure out how to reach out to Mike, and even if he never admits it to anyone else he can at least acknowledge to himself that it doesn't mean something, it means *everything*.

"So," Mike says, after they've both taken a few bites. "I have something to tell you."

Harvey has a piece of chicken halfway to his mouth, and the fork lingers in mid-air at that pronouncement. "That doesn't sound good."

"No, it is," Mike quickly says, but soon after adds a hesitant, "At least, *I* think it is," which does nothing to alleviate Harvey's concerns. He puts his fork down and gives Mike his full attention. "I got a job," Mike tells him, mouth quirking into a tentative smile. "At McNally Jackson Bookstore."

Harvey lets the information roll over him for a moment. Mike looks like he's bracing himself for some kind of attack, and the way Mike seems to curl in on himself hurts something deep within. So Harvey says, "Congratulations."

Mike's brow furrows in confusion. There's a few moments of silence, until Mike says, "So, that's it? Aren’t you going to tell me I'm not living up to my potential or some crap?"

"I can if you'd like. Is that what you want? Someone to tell you what you're doing isn’t good enough?"

Mike buries his head in his hands. Harvey suddenly remembers all the

times Mike sought his validation on something, the way he leaned on Harvey, trusted him implicitly to help steer Mike in the right direction. And Harvey will always help Mike in whatever way he needs. But sometimes that means letting him stand on his own two feet, it means letting him make the right decision for Mike and Mike alone. Harvey won't force him into a situation just because he thinks it's the better option.

"I don't know," Mike murmurs. "I don't know what I want."

"Mike, look at me," Harvey says, as gently as he can with it still being some kind of order. Mike raises his head, and he looks so wrecked. "Truth?" he asks, because he wants to make sure Mike really wants to hear this. Mike nods slowly, and Harvey sits forward in his chair, inching closer. "Do I think you're being wasted in a job like that? Absolutely. Of course I think you should be doing something amazing with your life. With a mind like yours, with the way you work and you care so wholeheartedly, you could do anything in the world, and you should be doing something more important than selling books. But, after everything that happened, if you don't know what you want to do, it's okay to do this in the meantime. I mean, do you enjoy it?"

"Yeah," Mike tells him, smiling warmly. "I mean, its retail, so it's not always awesome. But the people I work with are good, and I've got hundreds of books at my fingertips."

Harvey nods. "As long as you enjoy it, just keep going, until you figure out what it is you *do* want to do."

Mike nods absently, gaze wandering from Harvey to outside the office. Harvey follows his line of sight, and can see passersby slowing as they walk past his office, shamelessly staring in at them.

"What if what I want isn't an option?" Mike asks, voice distant, and when Harvey turns back to look at him, he can see Mike still looking past the glass walls.

"We'll figure something out," Harvey tells him, and he doesn't think it's a lie. "We always do."

"Hey, Harvey."

Harvey can hear the warmth in Mike's voice, despite the sounds of the city in the background doing their best to drown it out.

"Hey, is this a bad time?"

"No, just on my way to work. What's up?"

"Nothing," Harvey tells him, eyes unfocused as they look at the piles of paperwork on his desk. "Just needed to take a break and thought I'd see how you were."

Mike laughs. "So that's what I am now, a distraction?"

"If that's the worst thing you ever get called I think you're doing okay."

"So what are you working on?"

"Right now, I'm writing up a contract for SVTS's new Director."

"Why aren't you getting your associate to do that?" Mike asks, genuinely confused.

"Uh ... because I haven't hired one," Harvey says tentatively, almost framing the statement as a question. It feels stupid to be nervous telling Mike this. But if Mike ever wanted proof that Harvey still isn't over what happened, well, this is it. He's laying himself pretty bare now, and he has no idea how Mike is going to react.

The other end of the phone suddenly becomes dull, quiet, absent Mike's heavy breathing as he walks and talks. He gets the distinct impression that he's stopped Mike dead in his tracks with the news. "You need an associate, Harvey. Why haven't you hired one?"

Harvey runs a hand through his hair. He honestly doesn't mean for the conversation to go in this direction. He knew that he'd tell Mike eventually, and honestly, it's pretty impressive that it's been six weeks since Mike left and he's only just finding out.

"Jessica may have been able to fire you against my wishes, but she can't make me hire someone to replace you."

Harvey doesn't think about how he basically just told Mike he's irreplaceable. He doesn't think about how stupid this whole thing is, that he doesn't want anyone else by his side. He doesn't think about how he didn’t even want an associate of his own to begin with, but now he doesn't want one for a whole different reason.

"You're an idiot," Mike says, but the words are full of affection, and Harvey can't help but smile.

"So I've been told."

"At least get someone from the Associate pool to help you out. Don't overwork yourself."

Harvey considers pointing out that before Mike he did the same amount of work in the same hours and got by just fine, but there's something about the statement that feels like a lie, and he still doesn't really know what this thing between him and Mike is, how it's going to continue, but he knows that no matter what, he wants it to be honest.

"Can you recommend anyone who isn't a complete idiot?"

Mike chuckles. "Not really, but relatively speaking, Patel is the least idiotic one."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"You do that. Look, Harvey, I gotta go."

"Okay. Take care, Mike."

"Funny, I was just going to say the same thing to you."

"Okay, so say it."

"Nah, the moments gone now."

"Oh, there was a moment, was there? Must've missed that," Harvey grins.

Mike isn't in the room, must be somewhere in Soho, miles away, but Harvey can still see the eye roll. "You always have to have the last word, don't you?"

"Not always, just in about ninety five percent of situations."

"You're hopeless."

Harvey laughs. "Say goodbye, Mike."

"Goodbye, Mike," Mike says, just as Harvey knew he would, and when Harvey hangs up the phone, he's still smiling.

"Hungry?" Mike asks as soon as Harvey picks up the phone. No greeting, no pleasantries, just jumping right in.

"Sure," Harvey tells him.

"Chinese or pizza?"

"Pizza."

"Home or work?"

"Home."

"Okay, see you in twenty."

Mike hangs up, and Harvey keeps working for ten minutes before giving up for the evening, closing manila folders and capping pens and highlighters and putting everything away in anticipation of Mike's arrival. Fifteen minutes later there is a knock on the door, and Mike's there, steaming pizza box in hand and a smile lighting his face.

Harvey steps aside to let Mike in, and the younger man strides right in with no hesitation, putting the pizza on the table before removing his satchel from across his chest and his jacket from his shoulders, leaving both on a chair.

Harvey opens the box and can't help but immediately note that the crust looks suspiciously thick. "You got cheese in the crust, didn't you?"

There's no other word for it: Mike *beams* at him. "I swear, it'll blow your mind. And you're not my boss anymore, which means no more pulling rank over pizza options."

Harvey rolls his eyes at him, but it's habit now, and it somehow makes Mike look even happier. Harvey heads over to the kitchen and digs them out some plates and napkins. He leaves them on the counter while he pours them both a soda, and while he's doing that Mike collects the plates and dishes up the slices.

"Movie?" Harvey asks, handing over a drink to Mike and picking up his plate.

Mike nods, so they head over to the lounge. Mike kicks off his shoes and settles into the couch while Harvey browses the DVDs. "What are you in the mood for?"

"Anything where I don't have to think too much."

Harvey chuckles, pulling out the first action movie he comes across (Con Air) and putting it in the DVD player. "Why?" he asks, collapsing on the couch beside Mike. "Is your brain too taxed from selling Fifty Shades of Grey to bored housewives?"

Mike gives him a sharp look. "No way I'm selling that piece of shit to anyone."

Harvey laughs. "Who knew you had such high standards over what is basically porn."

"Hey, I have high standards over books in general. I don't care if it's porn or a history of twentieth century war or a thriller about a serial killer stalking the streets San Francisco, it at least has to be well written."

The DVD menu starts up, and Harvey hits play.

"See, even this," Mike continues, waving an arm in the general direction of the television, "it might be slightly ridiculous and over the top, but it's witty and has interesting characters and makes some kind of sense. Fifty Shades was just fucked up."

"The only way you could know that for sure is if you read it," Harvey points out with a smirk. He's a lawyer, it's what he does.

Mike just gives him this look. "Well, I had to see if it was as bad as I thought it was. It wasn't. It was worse. I got about a third of the way through before I gave up." He shudders, like it was so bad he wants to wipe the memory from his brain.

Harvey figures the next best thing is changing the topic. Personally he hasn't read it, had no inclination to read it, so there's not too much he could really say on the topic anyway, other than teasing Mike, and he's done that already. "So, have you thought any more about what you want to do, long term?"

"What, in the week and a half since I told you about my job?" Mike laughs.

"Actually I was thinking more in the month and a half since you left, but whatever."

Mike chuckles at him, before returning his attention to the television. Mike watches it for a few moments, long enough that Harvey wonders if he should turn his attention from Mike to the movie because Mike isn't going to answer. But then Mike says, "Of course I've been thinking about it. I can't *not* think about it. But no, I still don't know what I want to do."

Harvey takes a bite of his pizza. "Have you ever thought about going to law school for real?"

Mike just looks at him like he's an idiot. "Even if I managed to apply and be accepted, which given my history seems unlikely, there's no way I'd be able to afford it."

Harvey opens his mouth, but before any words form Mike cuts him off with a definitive, "And I swear to God if the next words out of your mouth are you offering to pay for me, I'll fucking deck you."

Harvey closes his mouth, then reopens it to say, "Actually I was just going to say that the pizza isn't completely terrible."

Mike looks at him for a moment, like he knows that wasn't what Harvey was originally going to say, but the smile threatening to break through says he's grateful for the ruse. "Told you so. You should listen to me more often, you know."

Harvey turns his attention back to the television. "Maybe I will. And just so you know, that offer, which I of course wasn't going to make, is always on the table if you ever change your mind."

"Noted."

Harvey's meeting finishes unexpectedly early, and since he’s actually in the neighborhood, decides that even though he really should get back to the office, he's going to surprise Mike. So he walks the few blocks to McNally Jackson, and enters the store with some kind of weird nervousness sitting in his stomach, which he does his best to ignore.

He ambles around the store, and finally sees Mike, organizing a display at the end of the aisle. Unable to resist, he sneaks up on the younger man and asks, "Excuse me, do you know where I could find Fifty Shades of Grey."

Mike looks up at him, amused and surprised all at once. "What are you doing here?"

Harvey shrugs. "Was in the neighborhood. Thought I'd see your new stomping grounds."

"And?"

Harvey looks around. "It's nice."

If he sounds pretty non-committal it's because he is. There's nothing wrong with it as such. It seems like a nice enough place. But it's not Pearson Hardman, it's not a law firm, it's not anything that Mike deserves (or anything that deserves Mike). Mike looks at him like he knows exactly what Harvey's thinking. And maybe he does. Harvey learned long ago that for all he gave Mike crap for reading books not people, Mike's always been able to read Harvey better than anyone. And Harvey knows he has a poker face, he makes his not inconsiderable living on this talent, but Mike seems to be the exception to every rule Harvey has.

"So," Harvey says, because he's starting to feel uncomfortable under Mike's scrutiny. "What can you recommend?"

"Seriously?" Mike asks, eyebrow raised.

Harvey just nods, and apparently for the sheer amusement of it, Mike leads him across the store to the fiction section. He scans the bookshelves – Harvey can't tell if he's browsing or looking for something specific – before he pulls a book from the shelf and places it in Harvey's hands.

The front cover has an out of focus watercolor painting, along with the title and author. He flips the book and skims the blurb as Mike says, "I read this a few years back. Actually..."

Harvey looks up at Mike when he doesn't continue. "Yes?" he prompts.

Mike looks away, embarrassed. But there's a small smile when he says, "I, uh, if memory serves I finished reading it the night before we met."

Harvey doesn't examine why it's that more than the book itself that makes him buy it. He just nods and says, "I'll take it."
Mike smiles at him. "I was about to go on break. Do you have time for a coffee?"

Harvey should probably start heading back to work, but thinks fuck it, if being senior partner doesn't give him the latitude to play hooky once in a while then what's the point? "Sure."

"Cool. You go pay for that and I'll grab us some drinks."

Harvey heads to the counter to pay, and when done heads over to the cafe section of the store. Mike's already ordered, and is waiting at one of their tables for him. There are a few people around, reading books and sipping latte's, but it's pretty quiet.

When he sits down Harvey makes an offhand comment about the woman who served him, which gets Mike talking about his co-workers and the ways in which they are completely different from everyone at Pearson Hardman. Their drinks arrive and Harvey keeps asking about his job and his customers and anything he can think of to keep the conversation going. As such, the next fifteen minutes fly by in a heartbeat.

"So," Mike eventually says, elbows on the table and leaning forward slightly. "You wanna tell me why you're really here. I know it's not just to buy a book."

"I told you, I was in the neighborhood. Thought I should come and see where you worked."

"And?"

"And... Okay, so this wasn't the reason I came here, but since I'm seeing you it saves me a phone call. John Moxham is in town for a few days, and I'm having a dinner meeting with him and his CFO. But for some reason, which I've yet to discern, their wives are both coming, so they told me to bring someone too."

Harvey hated taking plus ones to dinner meetings, because inevitably his latest fling would just sit there silently all night, bored out of her mind, like the last three times he stupidly took someone with him. And the truth is, he doesn't really need a plus one. If Mike says no, he'll go stag. But Mike, he's someone who can be completely at ease with a tableful of strangers and actively engage in their conversation. If he wanted an excuse to see Mike, this is a pretty good one.

"When is it?" Mike asks.

"Friday, seven o'clock."

"I'm working on Friday," Mike says, regretfully.

"Oh. Okay. That's fine." The words taste bitter on his tongue, but he tries to tamp down his disappointment.

"But Lidia owes me a favor. I could see if she'll swap with me."

"You don't have to do that," Harvey tells him, but he can feel his face betraying him.

And Mike must see it to, because he smiles and says, "I want to."

"So, is there anything I need to know about these people?" Mike calls from the guest room.

Harvey rolls his eyes. "Do you think this can wait until you're dressed?" he yells back.

"Just trying to save time," Mike returns, but doesn't pursue the matter any further.

When Mike had told him he got his shift changed, but that he wouldn't have time to backtrack to Brooklyn to shower and change and still get to dinner in Midtown on time and could he come straight to Harvey's instead, Harvey had said yes without really thinking. Only now Mike's here, in Harvey's condo, getting changed, and it makes Harvey antsy and nervous and he thinks he knows why but he's not ready to deal with it, not yet. So he stops Mike from talking to him while he's half naked and returns his attention to his tablet.

"Well?" Mike asks several minutes later as he strides back into the lounge, tie flung over his shoulder and suit jacket in hand.

"No, nothing major. They're both refreshingly honest and moral, despite the potential that having a five hundred million dollar company provides. No affairs, no shady deals, nothing underhanded. At least, not that we could find."

"Huh," Mike says distractedly as he ties his tie. "Must be a nice change

of pace."

"Not really. People who bitch and backstab and only look out for themselves I'm used to. I understand them. People who are too principled make me nervous."

There's a beat, like Mike's confused. The sincerity in Mike's voice when he says, "*You're* principled," makes something in Harvey ache.

Harvey decides this is getting too close to something real, and though he's not entirely opposed to that, now is definitely not the time. So instead of replying to that comment he simply asks, "Are you ready?"

Mike nods as he shucks on his jacket, and they head out together. It's not far to the restaurant from Harvey's place, and though Harvey had been hoping that they'd be first there when the hostess shows them to the table it's to see they're actually the last to arrive. John is the first to see them, and he stands to meet them. Greetings are had and introductions made in a flurry of handshakes and smiles before they take their seats.

The thing about John and Russell is that though they can be genial and open, they're also very serious and definitive when it comes to their work. To that end, over the entree and main courses, it's all business. The three of them hash everything out, and he occasionally glances at Margaret and June to see them looking vaguely bored. He feels bad, but then remembers that he wasn't the one who invited them.

When he looks to Mike, which happens more than is probably necessary, he can see Mike desperate to jump in with opinions and ideas, but he remains quiet the whole time. Harvey hadn't thought about that before. For all the other events Mike had come to since he was fired, they were larger, less business focused, more about networking than actual lawyering. But this is the first time he's really been in a situation where he's seen Harvey completely at work, where he has the opportunity but not the authorization to jump in with relevant comments. Because Mike knows he isn't a lawyer anymore, so he remains silent, and Harvey desperately wants to bring him in to the conversation but doesn't know how John and Russell would react, or more to the point, how Mike would react to this reminder of the life that was torn from him.

Harvey wonders, not for the first time, why Mike keeps coming with him to these events. It must be painful for him, to see those glimpses

of a life he's no longer a part of. And yet he still keeps coming whenever Harvey asks. More than that, actually, he not only goes with Harvey but rearranges his life so he's able to do so.

Once business is taken care of the table settles into an easy conversation. Harvey asks what their plans are while they're in town, and Russell immediately makes Harvey and Mike jealous by saying they are going to the playoffs on Sunday. This of course starts a debate at the table about the merits of everyone's team of choice, during which Mike rattles off statistic after statistic, more than once silencing the table with his knowledge. June asks Mike what he does, and when he says he works at a bookstore they start talking about some new release Harvey's never heard of but apparently people either love or hate. The conversation digresses from topic to topic: an article in this morning's Times, the latest dessert craze, the rate of inflation, the drama on the latest episode of Project Runway...

John is telling everyone about their trip to New Zealand, and because Mike is a not so closeted geek, he immediately mentions Lord of the Rings, and then John and Margaret regale Mike and Russell with tales of all the places they saw from the films. June is about as interested in Lord of the Rings as Harvey is, so the two of them chat amongst themselves, June asking about the art scene in New York and Harvey happy to give her some suggestions of museums and galleries to visit while she's here.

"So," June says, once Harvey's told her about his favorite exhibitions, "how long have you and Mike been together?"

Harvey's more surprised by the question than he probably should be. Because really, John and Russell brought their wives and Harvey brought Mike. It's not an unreasonable conclusion to reach.

"We're not," he tells her. "We're just friends."

June looks at him, confused, like she thinks either Harvey is lying and she doesn't know why, or that he's telling the truth but she can't figure out why he brought a friend and not a date.

"Friends," she echoes disbelievingly.

Harvey nods, throat suddenly thick, preventing words from forming. Really, it's not difficult to explain. He and Mike are friends, and Mike was his associate so he wouldn't get bored by all the shop talk, and he's not dating anyone so there's no one else to bring. It's all very reasonable, and he shouldn't have any trouble saying the words. But

he can't. He takes a sip of water, but that doesn't help. He glances at Mike, sees the younger man in a passionate discussion with John, something about the allegorical nature of the battle between the Ents and Uruk-hai. It's been too long since Harvey's seen him so passionate about something, and even if it is just a movie, it makes Harvey happy to see something of the Mike he knew on a daily basis. He loves seeing Mike this enthusiastic, whether it's over a movie or getting too involved with their clients even when Harvey told him not to.

When Harvey turns back to June she's just grinning at him, like she knows exactly what's going on between them (and if she does, Harvey wishes she'd explain it to him). He sighs. "Okay," he turns more towards her, back to Mike, voice low so Mike doesn't hear, "whatever you think we are, we're not. But maybe friends isn't entirely accurate either."

"I get the feeling there's a story here."

"There is, a long and complicated one."

"Well, I won't ask you for all the details," June says, smiling warmly at him. "But Harvey, from what I've seen tonight, you're not just friends."

It's been a week and a half, and Harvey hasn't seen Mike since his client dinner.

Their schedules keep clashing and work keeps getting in the way and it all becomes too hard. But unlike the last time they hadn't seen each other, Harvey isn't anxious about it this time. He isn't worried that it's a permanent state, because they might not have seen each other but there have been text messages and brief phone calls and emails, so they might not have physically seen each other but they are still in touch.

His relationship with Jessica hasn't improved, and Harvey's finding it difficult to care. Jessica will always be important to him, but Harvey can hold a grudge like no one's business, and even if he understands why she did it, he'll never forgive her for firing Mike.

Or hiring someone to replace him, come to that. Harvey's certain she does it just to spite him, because she knows that he has no desire or intention to replace Mike. Whenever she brings the topic up he either

ignores her or flat out tells her he isn't interested.

So this morning, when he arrives work to find a young man sitting in his office, the first words out of his mouth are, "Who the hell are you?"

The random person looks perplexed, answering, "Shaun Tang. Your Associate."

Harvey leaves him sitting there, gaping and confused, and goes straight to Jessica.

"No, Jessica," he says as soon as he enters her office. "I'm not having a new Associate."

"You are if I say you are," Jessica says, her smile sickeningly sweet.

"What about taking away my bonuses and perks. I thought you were still pissed over what happened."

Jessica just looks at him like he's an idiot, and then Harvey realizes. He *is* an idiot. Jessica didn't hire Shaun because she wanted him to have the help; she did it because Harvey *didn't* want it. It's still a punishment.

"You can't make me do this," Harvey says, more confident than he feels.

"You don't like it, you know where the door is," Jessica tells him, like she genuinely doesn't care either way.

Harvey sighs, suddenly exhausted. He collapses onto the sofa. "Are you ever going to stop punishing me?"

"If you give me reason to."

"What does that mean?" he asks, genuinely confused.

"It means that it's one thing to not know Mike was lying to you this whole time, or to hide the truth from me because I think we both know that you knew from day one. But I asked you to cut Mike off and you haven't. Not only are you still in contact with him, you're taking him to business dinners."

There's something about her tone that makes him think that she knows he's been taking Mike to events, even when it wasn't to rub it in her face. "How do you know that?" Harvey asks, dread coursing through his veins.

Jessica just looks at him. "How do you think?"

Donna. It's the only explanation. Because Jessica knew about the fundraiser and Wyatt's and Langbroek's, but there's no other way she could know about everything else.

He takes a deep breath. "I can't give him up, Jessica."

"Why not?" she asks, curious and frustrated all at once.

It's a good question, but the truth is, he doesn't have an answer. He doesn't know why he can't just let Mike go. It would be the easier option after all. But Mike has been in his life for three years now, and in terms of time that might not compare to how long he's known Jessica or Donna, but Harvey can't help but feel like that doesn't matter. Sometimes (okay, most of the time) it feels like Mike is the most important person in his life, and how is he just supposed to pretend otherwise?

So Harvey doesn't have an answer, not one Jessica would appreciate at any rate, so instead of lying to her or telling her something she doesn't want to hear, he just stands and walks back to his office.

When he approaches he can see Donna looking apprehensively at him. He glances into his office and Shaun is still sitting there. So he pauses by his office door and says to Shaun, "You, out," before turning to Donna and saying, "You, in."

Shaun practically runs out of the room, head cowered. Donna isn't quite so sheepish, but she does look like she's steeling herself as she brushes past him.

Harvey closes the door behind him, walking over and sitting at his desk. "You told Jessica about me and Mike," he says, voice hard and not even a question. It probably should be a question. He doesn't know for certain it was Donna, and yet, he just does.

"She asked. What was I supposed to do, lie?"

Harvey rubs a hand over his face. He's too old for this shit. It's been two and a half months since Mike left and he still feels turned upside down by it. And then on top of that he has to deal with Donna seemingly selling him out and Jessica refusing to let the issue go. He just wants to move on, but he doesn't know if he'll ever be able to.

"What happened?" he asks at last.

"I was doing some paperwork after your meeting with Moxham, and Jessica came by. You were in a meeting so she asked me how it was all going. I updated her on your meeting and she asked how your date survived all the boring work talk and I told her I think he survived just fine. The pronoun must've caught her attention and she asked if you took Mike. I didn't know what to say, Harvey, so I told her the truth."

"You told her he's been my plus one for everything, didn't you?" he asks, already knowing the answer.

Donna nods.

"How did you even know I'd taken Mike?" He had very purposely not told her, made it a point to invite Mike whenever she wasn't around to hear. He wasn't ready to talk about the why of it all, why he was hiding it from Donna, why he was so pissed she'd found out. Talking about it made it real in a way Harvey wasn't ready for yet.

"Because I do," Donna says, like that's enough of an answer.

And for now it is. He doesn't want to keep talking about this, not when he's so angry. He's feeling cornered, the pressure pushing at him from every side and it's like he can't breathe.

Harvey nods his head in dismissal, and Donna says nothing else, just stands and leaves him alone. Without even really thinking about it, Harvey pulls out his cell and dials Mike's number.

It goes to voicemail. Of course it does.

After Mike's message and the obligatory beep, Harvey says, "Hey, it's me. Just calling to say hi. Call me back if you can."

Harvey loves his condo. It's the one place in the world he feels truly comfortable, and despite the copious amounts of glass, it's the one place he doesn't have to hide. Walking through the front door is usually like a soothing balm, and he feels like he can breathe that much easier.

But not today. His case isn't going well, and he knows he was short with everyone and he regrets that, of course he does. But everything just feels like it's compounding on him, a heavy pressure in his chest

and brain, and even now, late into the evening on a Friday night, he still feels tense. He left work hours ago, hoping that coming home would help. It hasn't. He feels restless, completely exhausted but too wired to sleep.

He grabs his wallet and keys, heading outside to get some fresh air. It's a lie he tells himself just to get out the door, and from there it's all too easy to hail a cab and give the driver Mike's address.

It's late, closer to one than midnight, and even as he's knocking on the door he's torn between wanting to run and wanting to stay. He shouldn't just turn up here unannounced. He shouldn't be knocking on Mike's door at this late hour. He should've just gone for a walk, or a drink, or done anything else but this.

But then Mike answers the door, sleepy and soft in rumpled pajamas, and Harvey already feels more settled. It's scary, how Mike can make him feel better so quickly, and Mike immediately asks Harvey what's wrong, concern clear on his face. Harvey feels it like a punch to the gut, how wrong him being here is.

"Sorry," Harvey mumbles, gaze averted. "I shouldn’t have woken you. I'll just..."

He tries to walk away, but doesn't move quickly enough, and Mike's fingers are around his wrist and pulling insistently and Harvey allows himself to be dragged into the apartment.

Harvey just stands there dumbly, as Mike closes and locks the door, and then there is the ghost of Mike's fingertips on his neck for a moment before fingers deftly hook under his jacket collar, and Harvey helps Mike remove the jacket.

"Are you okay?" Mike asks, once he's laid the coat carefully over the back of the couch, stepping around to face him.

"Not really," Harvey admits, and he can't remember it ever being so easy to break down his infallible facade. Admitting weakness is not something he's ever been okay with, and he keeps up his 'nothing can touch me' demeanor with everyone, even Donna and Jessica. But Mike is like his safe space now, he's the one person he can be real and honest with, and there's a reason he came here instead of getting lost in the anonymity the city often provides.

"What happened?" Mike asks, and despite the fact that Harvey clearly woke Mike up when he knocked on his door, Mike still looks

interested, concerned.

So Harvey tells him. He tells him about Jessica hiring someone to replace Mike, about his conversations with Donna and Jessica, about how he can barely even tolerate his new associate. He tells Mike about going up against Cameron in his current case. He tells Mike about his client, how he feels like he's failing her. He basically rants for ten minutes without taking a breath, and Mike lets him, asking the occasional question or throwing in a comment or two but otherwise remaining silent. It's exactly what Harvey needed, and when done he feels completely drained, but in a good way.

Harvey takes a deep breath, smiling softly at Mike. He doesn't say thank you, because he knows that Mike knows how much he appreciates it. Instead he says, "I should go, let you get back to sleep."

"It'll take you forever to get home. It's late, you should just stay here."

Harvey just looks at him in silent question. Mike tilts his head in the direction of his bedroom before turning and heading there himself. Harvey follows, uncertain, and watches Mike climb back into bed, very purposely leaving enough room for Harvey, reaching over and turning off the light before lying down and closing his eyes.

Harvey knows he should leave. Just walk out the door and go. But the idea of warmth and genuine human contact is too tempting. So he sheds his clothes, until he's in nothing but his t-shirt and boxer briefs, before crawling into bed beside Mike.

He feels awkward at first, is aware of every breath, every movement. But as the moments tick by he can feel his muscles relaxing, his breathing becoming more even, his body warming up. It's silent, but not really, because they are a lot closer to the ground than Harvey's used to, and he can hear a low level of noise coming from the street, cars driving by and people talking and the occasional burst of music.

It's surprisingly intimate, just lying here, both of them clothed and not even touching. Harvey has spent more evenings than he can count tangled up with someone, naked and sweaty, and it never felt like this. Perhaps that's why it's different, because it's so much more innocent, and it means so much more.

Maybe it's the late hour, or the way his mind is completely fried, or the quiet simplicity of the moment, but Harvey finds himself whispering into the dark, "Do you ever miss working at Pearson Hardman?"

(And Harvey knows what he actually means is *do you ever miss working with me? Do you miss being with me all day long? Do you miss me as much as I miss you?*)

There's no reply at first, and Harvey thinks that maybe Mike's already asleep. But then Mike murmurs, voice slightly hoarse, "Yes, every day."

Harvey manages to get to sleep with surprising ease after that, and he wakes in the morning, well rested and completely alone. Still half asleep Harvey sits, tries to see with bleary eyes if Mike's in the kitchen or lounge area, but there's nothing, not even the sound of movement or running water. He rubs a hand over his face and lies back down, finally seeing a note on Mike's pillow.

Before he even starts reading he can't help but notice the key taped to the bottom of the paper. Mike's writing is messy, but luckily three years of trying to discern Mike's chaotic notes have made his scrawl relatively legible.

Had to go into work. Stay as long as you like but if you leave before I get home just make sure you lock up. Remember Harvey, you're the best goddamn closer in the city and mere mortals cower before you. Never forget that and you'll be fine.

Harvey feels impossibly better. He lies in bed for a while. It's still relatively early, so Mike must've had an opening shift, and he just lies there, warm and content. It should be weird, being in Mike's apartment when he's not there, but it's honestly not. He dozes for a while, and even though Mike basically gave him carte blanche to stay all day, an hour or so later he gets up and dresses in yesterday's clothes (ignoring how it's going to feel like a walk of shame, without the sex).

He locks the apartment as he leaves, keeping the key securely in hand.

Harvey spends the day lounging around the condo, doing some chores he's been putting off, mainlining a TV show everyone was raving about but he hadn't had the chance to watch yet.

The shining silver of Mike's apartment key teases him all day long, sitting there innocuously on the coffee table. Harvey keeps glancing to

it, feeling stupid every time he does.

After dinner Harvey grabs his cell and texts Mike: *Thanks for letting me crash last night.*

Mike's reply is surprisingly swift. *You're welcome.*

I should probably get your key back to you at some point.

Keep it. Never know when you might need it again.

Harvey puts off the phone call for as long as possible. He doesn't want to call Mike to cancel on him. He wants to go out and see a movie and turn his brain off and relax, have fun. But his trial date is approaching at a rapid rate, and it's taking far longer than he anticipated to prepare, so as much as he wants to just sit in the dark for two hours with Mike, he really needs to stay here.

So he grabs his cell and calls.

"Hey," Mike answers after only two rings, his voice warm and open.

"Hi," Harvey replies, low and soft. "How are you?"

"Good. You?"

"Not great," Harvey admits around a sigh. "Look, Mike, I'm sorry but I'm not going to make the movie tonight."

"Everything okay?" Mike asks, concerned.

"Yeah, it's just, trial starts on Monday. I still have a lot of work to get through between now and then."

"What, you mean the new associate can't get through as much work as me? I'm shocked," Mike chuckles, and despite the exhaustion Harvey smiles.

He leans back in his chair, rubs a hand over his face. "The new associate is doing exactly nothing. I don't want him anywhere near my cases."

There's a pause, before Mike's voice comes over the line, slightly

hesitant. "I know you weren't exactly thrilled about Jessica hiring someone to replace me, but you have been giving them work, haven't you?"

The short answer is: no. The long answer is: though Shaun appeared capable and intelligent enough, Harvey still wasn't ready for a new associate. It was hard, harder than he thought it would be, going back to doing all the work himself. He knew he'd relied on Mike, but every day he felt Mike's absence. And he wasn't interested in letting Shaun step into Mike's vacated shoes. So he treated him exactly as he treated all the other associates: he barely acknowledged his existence.

Harvey doesn't answer Mike's question, and maybe it's cowardly, but he doesn't want to have this conversation. So, after a too long silence, Harvey says, "I should go. Raincheck on the movie though, okay?"

He can hear Mike's sigh, and he hates it, knowing that he's disappointed Mike. "I'll talk to you later, Harvey."

Harvey hangs up the phone, unsurprisingly feeling pretty shitty. But he hasn't gotten to where he is today without the ability to compartmentalize, so he pushes it aside and focuses on work.

He loses track of time, and it must be an hour or so later when the sound of his office door opening causes him to look up. He's genuinely surprised to see Mike, standing there in jeans and a thick coat, which is slightly damp from the late fall rain.

"What are you doing here?" Harvey asks, unable to help the wonder and slight relief in his voice.

Mike shrugs, shedding his jacket and throwing it on a nearby chair. "I made plans with someone but the asshole cancelled on me," he smiles. "So my evening opened up. Thought I'd see if you wanted some help."

"You don't have to do that," Harvey tells him, even though he's actually quite touched by the gesture.

Mike sits down on the other side of the desk from Harvey. "It's a one-time offer, because I know how anxious you are about going up against Cameron next week. And it does come with a condition."

"What's that?"

Mike leans forward slightly, eyes fixed on Harvey and voice completely earnest when he says, "You need to start letting Shaun do

his job, and help you with your cases."

He honestly was not expecting that. And something bristles in Harvey, how much Mike seems to be invested in this person he's never even met. "You don't even know him. Why do you care what work he does?"

"I don't care about him at all, I care about you," Mike says easily. "You're one of the best lawyers in the city, it's true. But you can't do everything. It's okay to let someone in, to ask for help once in a while."

Harvey can't help but think about how Mike was the last person he let in, and how he never wants to go through that again. He's said it his whole life: caring makes you weak. If he hadn't cared, if he hadn't let Mike in, then he wouldn't have suffered the pain that came with Mike leaving.

But then he looks at Mike, and the concern he sees there is obvious and genuine. He really does have Harvey's best interests at heart, still cares about him and wants to help him, even though Mike was a casualty of Harvey's inability to protect those he himself cared most about. And Mike is here, in Harvey's office, in his *life*. Yes, he lost Mike as his associate, but he's gained something even better.

"So," Mike says, sitting back in his chair, smiling, like he already knows he's won. "Do we have a deal?"

Harvey nods. "Deal."

Harvey is only home for about fifteen minutes before there's an unexpected knock on his door. He opens it to discover Mike standing there, grinning at him, a white box in his hands.

"Happy birthday, old man," Mike beams.

"I'm not old," Harvey protests.

"Well, you're always going to be twelve years older than me, just remember that," Mike teases as he walks in.

Harvey, because as Mike just pointed out is the mature one, lets the

comment go. He trails after Mike, who puts the box on the kitchen counter before opening it, pulling out what is unmistakably his favorite cake from his favorite bakery. Mike smiles at him, briefly and shyly, and Harvey has a passing moment to wonder at this person, who seemingly knows him so well, as Mike pulls out a candle from the box and a lighter from his pocket.

"At least tell me you aren't going to sing," Harvey deadpans when he's done.

"Trust me, no one wants to hear me sing. Make a wish."

Birthday wishes are for children, but seeing Mike standing there, looking happily at him, his traitorous mind (or should that be his traitorous heart?) conjures one anyway. He smiles at Mike, small but sincere, and blows out the candle. Mike grins at him, before pulling out some plates and cutlery. Harvey cuts the cake, plating them both a generous serve.

"Delicious," Harvey says, after taking his first bite.

Mike laughs. "It better be after going out into the day before Thanksgiving madness to buy it for you."

"Well, thank you," Harvey tells him earnestly.

"You're very welcome."

Harvey grabs them some drinks and they take their cake over to the lounge.

"So, what are your plans for Thanksgiving?" Mike asks as Harvey flicks through the TV to find them something to watch.

"Usual: parade, football, take out."

"You aren't doing something with your family?"

Harvey shakes his head. "Marcus lives in California. We don't really get to see each other much. I mean, we call and everything, but seeing each other regularly is difficult. And besides, he has his own family to spend the holiday with."

"Fair enough."

"What about you? Helping out at Project FIND like usual?"

"Nah, I wasn't really feeling up to it this year. Seems like my plans are the same as yours."

Harvey nods, taking a slow bite of his cake. He's nervous, but tries his best to appear nonchalant when he asks, "Did you wanna come over tomorrow?"

Mike grins at him. "It's probably the logical thing to do."

You free for drinks tonight?

Harvey stares at the text for a moment. They've never done drinks before. They've done parties and meals and movies and hanging out and, of course, that one sleep over, but they've never done drinks before. Harvey can't help but wonder if there's a reason Mike wants to do it now.

Sure. Are we celebrating or commiserating?

Mike's answer is swift and infuriatingly oblique. *Neither. Just wanted to talk.*

Something's wrong. Harvey doesn't know what, but there's something. So instead of texting back he hits Mike's number and dials.

"Yes, Harvey, I'm fine, jeez overreact much," Mike says in greeting, laughing the whole time.

It says something, Harvey thinks, about how far they've come these last three and a bit months, that not only is Harvey overtly caring for Mike, but that Mike *knew* it, he knew Harvey was worried about him but could still tease him about it. The core of the relationship they used to have is still there, where they always knew what the other wanted or needed without it being explicitly stated, but it's different now. It's personal and immediate and just so natural.

"Are you sure, because I'm fairly certain in the history of conversation nothing good has ever come from the phrase 'I just want to talk.'"

"Pretty sure that only counts if you're in a relationship," Mike says, but his breath hitches towards the end, like he's just realized what he's said and isn't sure how it will be received.

Harvey's initial reaction is to say something along the lines of *well what exactly do you call this?* . But he thinks better of it, because if (or *when*, he's getting the distinct feeling it's just a matter of time now) they have this conversation, it should be in person.

"Fair enough. So, where do you wanna go."

"Don't care."

"Okay, how about 1806. Eight-ish?"

"Okay, see you then."

"Bye, Mike."

Harvey honestly tries not worry, but as the day wears on he just can't help it. He tries not to let his anxiety show, but he must not do a very good job of it, because at just past seven Donna bodily shoves him out the door, muttering about being sick of staring at his long face all day.

He would normally catch a cab, but he has an hour to kill now, so he walks instead. It's cold out, even with his thick coat, but he doesn't mind. The city streets are dense with people, and he's only a few blocks from the bar when the first December snowfall lightly floats down from above.

It's warm inside, so he shucks off his coat and slides easily onto a bar stool as far away from the door as he can get. He orders a beer, silently sips it while he waits.

Mike arrives about ten minutes later. The bar is pretty empty, so he sees Harvey straight away, smiling brightly when he does. He quickly strips off his jacket and puts it over Harvey's coat on the coat rack.

"Hey," Mike greets him easily, sliding onto the stool beside Harvey.

"Hey," Harvey replies.

A bartender appears, so Mike just points at Harvey's drink and orders the same. "So," Mike turns to him when the bartender walks away. "How was work today?"

It's not that Mike asking him about his day is at all out of the ordinary, but Harvey has a sneaking suspicion that he isn't ready to just jump right in with whatever it is they're actually here to talk about. So Harvey allows him this moment of delay, telling Mike about

his day, his case, Donna's comments about Louis, and the work Shaun has done which wasn't completely terrible.

They chat for over an hour, the bar filling up around them, their drinks being replenished twice. But it's all just idle talk, nothing about the real reason they're here, and Harvey starts to wonder if he'd just overreacted, that maybe Mike did just want to hang out and there was no ulterior motive.

Of course, no sooner is that thought in his head than Mike turns to him and says, "So, there's something I want to tell you."

Harvey takes one last gulp of his drink before putting it aside. He looks at Mike with what he hopes is an open and curious expression. "Okay."

"I think I know what it is I want to do," Mike says in a rush, obviously nervous.

"Yeah?" Harvey smiles. "Tell me."

"Remember Joseph, my friend from work?" At Harvey's nod, Mike continues, "Well, his girlfriend, Elena, she's this amazing pastry chef, right? Like, melt in your mouth, convert religions type good. She works at a restaurant and her boss is a total dick. He basically treats her like crap and takes credit for her work, even claiming some of the things she has created came from him. She wants to set up her own place, but she has no head for business."

"But you do," Harvey says, everything falling into place.

"Yeah," Mike smiles. "I'm good with numbers, and know the law, and everything I don't know I can learn. So we're thinking about doing it together, setting up a bakery, having some in house eating but also doing custom orders for special occasions. We found a place to rent, it used to be a cafe so it's basically all set up, we'd just need to rebrand it and make some cosmetic changes to the shop. She'll do all the cooking, I'll run the business side of things, help out in the shop as much as I can..."

"What does she make?"

"Everything. Cakes, brownies, cheesecakes, macarons, cupcakes. Just wait 'til you try them. Your sweet tooth will explode with happiness."

"I don't have a sweet tooth," Harvey objects.

"Please," Mike deadpans. "I once saw you eat half a cake, remember."

"It was my birthday, that doesn't count," Harvey laughs, and Mike does too. "It sounds like you must be pretty far along in the process if you're finding buildings to rent."

"Yeah. I know I should've told you earlier, but in the beginning it was just this idea we weren't even sure was viable. But the more we researched and worked the numbers and looked at retail spaces, the more we realized that we could do it, or more to the point, that we really wanted to try. It might fail spectacularly, and given my track record it's probably the more likely scenario. But I'm excited about it, too. I really am. And I didn't want to tell you until I was sure."

"Well I'm glad you've told me now. And if this is what you really want then I'm happy for you, Mike. Really. And hey, if you ever need some legal work, let me know. I need to up my pro-bono hours anyway."

Mike chuckles, but he looks away, biting his lip as runs a fingertip up and down his glass for a few moments. "I have the money I saved from when I worked for you, and Elena's putting in everything she has, and she's found another investor to contribute. But I've run the numbers a few times and we're still short, and-"

"Yes," Harvey interrupts, unequivocal and certain.

Mike barks out a laugh. "I haven't even asked yet."

Harvey shrugs. "No need. The answer's still yes."

"But you don't even know how much-"

Harvey wraps a hand around the back of Mike's neck, squeezing gently, the touch cutting Mike off. "Mike, the answer is *always* going to be yes."

Mike looks at him in the low light of the room. They're so close, and Mike keeps his gaze locked on Harvey's, licking his lips briefly. It's intimate in a way nothing between them has ever been before, and he tells himself it's just because of the way they are being so openly tactile in a public arena.

"Okay," Mike whispers, so low Harvey can barely hear him, and Harvey can't help the feeling that the word is not in reference to this moment but to them, to their relationship, and so Harvey can't fight the smile that tugs at his lips. It feels like a promise, and Harvey

squeezes his neck once more before letting go. Mike sits up straighter, clears his throat before talking again. "Okay, but it's *not* a loan. It's an investment."

"And I'm sure it will be a great one," Harvey tells him. "I believe in you, Mike. I have no doubt you'll be amazingly successful."

Mike lifts his drink up, and Harvey lets out a breathy laugh, tapping his own against it.

Harvey's surprised to see Mike standing on the other side of his front door when he opens it. Not because Mike coming over is a rare occurrence, because it's really not. Even the turning up unannounced part isn't unusual. But Harvey vaguely recalls Mike saying he was working with Elena tonight, so he didn't expect Mike on his doorstep.

"Hey," Mike says as he steps into the apartment. "I was in the neighborhood and I was wondering if you wanted to go grab dinner or catch a movie or something."

Harvey can't say what about today is different. In fact, looking at it objectively, there is nothing about today that's different. Mike's dressed in casual clothes, his shoulders and hair slightly damp from the snow. He's smiling warmly, and it tugs at Harvey's insides in a familiar way. And suddenly Harvey just can't pretend anymore.

So instead of answering, Harvey steps forward and kisses him.

It's brief, a testing of waters, and when he opens his eyes and looks at Mike the younger man is looking at Harvey like he's never seen him before. It's enough for the panic to spark in his heart, but then Mike smiles, cradling Harvey's face in his hands and leaning in for a kiss.

It's slow and relatively chaste, which surprises Harvey but not in a bad way. He supposes that it's a good continuation of their relationship these last three and a half months, the way they move tentatively but in the same direction. And he doesn't want to rush this, because he's certainly waited long enough for it to happen.

So as he deepens the kiss, his fingers manage to grip the front of Mike's coat, pulling him along with ease as he backtracks towards the bedroom. Mike laughs against his lips. It's a slow meander, and by the

time they make it Mike is driving him crazy by pressing sensual, open mouth kisses along his jaw line.

The sensation is horribly distracting, but after indulging for a few moments he gathers his wits enough to start stripping Mike of his clothing. He pushes the coat from his shoulders, and Mike is of no help whatsoever because he apparently refuses to detach himself from Harvey's jaw.

Harvey tilts his head, catches Mike's lips with his own, tongue slipping into this mouth as his hands slide under Mike's sweater to grip at his hips. Their bodies are pressed close, but it's still not enough. He needs skin, he needs to touch and explore.

So as hard as it is, Harvey reluctantly withdraws so he can pull his long sleeved Henley over his head. Mike, clearly taking the very obvious hint, does the same, starts stripping off his layers. They don't touch each other, but their eyes are locked, veering away only to watch skin being revealed when an article of clothing is removed, and as such it's still amazingly intimate.

Harvey, having far less layers, is done first, so he decides to help Mike along. He latches onto Mike's neck, tongue and teeth exploring, as his hands go to Mike's jeans, undoing them with ease before slipping a hand beneath.

"Fuck," Mike moans, barely above a whisper, his hand alternating between cupping the back of Harvey's neck and sliding through his hair.

Hickeys have never been a massive kink of Harvey's, but seeing his handiwork on Mike's skin, so in contrast to the pale white, he thinks it's in serious danger of becoming one. He shifts back to admire it for a moment, then removes his hand, causing a brief whimper of disappointment. Harvey can't help it, laughing lightly and briefly kissing Mike's lips before putting that hand to good use, pushing Mike back onto the bed and sliding his jeans and boxers off.

He follows soon after, knees on either side of Mike's body as he leans down and presses a lingering kiss on Mike's stomach, slowly exploring the expanse of skin with wandering hands and an eager mouth. The best part is the little noises Mike makes: a gasp of surprise when his tongue dips into Mike's belly button, a moan of pleasure when teeth scrape lightly along his ribs, a whispered expletive when a fingertip lightly skirts his nipple.

Mike cups his face, and then pulls him up, kissing him hungrily. Harvey collapses quite awkwardly on top of Mike, so he readjusts his weight, moves into position so their whole bodies are aligned. Mike is so warm beneath him, his hands moving easily across his back and ass, exploring. He can feel Mike hardening beneath him, and he starts moving, bodies aligning and the friction perfect and Mike breaks their kiss with an, "Oh God."

Harvey can't help but smile down at him, moving in earnest now, their bodies sliding even closer when Mike hooks a leg over his hip. Mike fingertips trail lightly over the side of his face, the touch reverent, and when his thumb traces Harvey's lips he can't help but press a kiss there.

"Harvey," Mike whispers, but Harvey doesn't want to talk now, so he leans down and kisses Mike, tongue sweeping through his mouth so completely that Mike actually whines. He keeps moving against Mike, pulling them closer to the inevitable. But then Mike stops kissing him, panting his name. "Harvey. Harvey, I want-" He's cut off by Harvey's mouth once more, but the kiss doesn't last, because Harvey knows exactly what Mike wants, and he wants it too.

So he climbs off Mike, crawls down to the head of the bed. He pushes his pillows away and sits against the headboard, reaching across to the side shelf on his bedside table and grabbing a condom and bottle of lube.

He knows Mike is watching. He's never one to get stage fright or shy when people look at him, but this is Mike, and it's like everything is different with him. He feels nervous, more nervous than he'd ever imagined being. Not because he doesn't want this or thinks that Mike doesn't want it or is worried that it's not going to be good, because he knows they're both desperate and it's going to be amazing. But it's also going to change everything, and he's not made this transition successfully once, and the precedent makes him anxious. But then he looks up, sees Mike staring unabashedly at him with complete desire and adoration, and he thinks if everything with him and Mike is different then surely that means that this time, they will last.

He barely has the condom on before Mike is right there, crawling into his lap and kissing him deeply. Harvey's not gonna lie, it's very distracting, and he luxuriates in the feeling of kissing Mike for a few moments, their bodies pressed close, Mike's cock nudging his stomach. But his blood is heating with desire so he gets his brain to focus. He quickly slicks up his fingers, slipping his hand beneath Mike to tease

at his hole. Mike's eyelids flutter closed at the first touch. Harvey pushes in and Mike groans, head tipped back and biting his lower lip. Mike won't keep still, grinding against his fingers, desperate for more. Indeed, he's so desperate that before Harvey realizes what's happening, Mike has pushed up onto his knees so he can pull Harvey's hand away, inching forward and sinking down onto Harvey's cock.

Harvey gasps, surprise and pleasure mingling into one as Mike descends, halting once he's fully sheathed. Mike kisses him briefly.

"This is the stupidest thing we've ever done," Mike says softly, a smile softening the words, as he starts moving.

Harvey grins lazily in return. "Including the time I hired you to be a lawyer even though you don't have a degree?"

"Okay," Mike says, breath hitching slightly. "The second stupidest thing we've done."

Harvey grips Mike's hips, his body moving as much as it can in this position, countering Mike's movements. "I don't know about you, but I think our stupidest ideas are also our best ones."

Mike grins down at him, wrapping an arm around his shoulder and kissing him. Mike fucks himself slowly on Harvey, long and languid movements, a constant rhythm of building pressure. It feels incredible to Harvey, how something so simple can make him feel so much, but he's never wanted anyone the way he wants Mike, and a perfect moment in life is rare so he's going to enjoy this one for as long as he can.

Harvey's hand wanders from Mike's hip, slips between their bodies to wrap around Mike's cock. The younger man breaks the kiss with a sigh, their faces still pressed so close that Harvey can feel every exhale Mike makes on his slick lips.

It's like some silent signal, and the pace of everything quickens: their bodies move faster, their breaths are shorter. Harvey wants to make Mike come first, and if the way Mike is moving in his lap is any indication, he must be having the same idea. It's not a competition; it's just desperation in its most generous form, and Harvey can't wait to see Mike fall apart. It's so tempting to just close his eyes and ride the sensation of being inside Mike, but he fights it with every ounce of willpower he has, keeping his eyes open and fixed on Mike.

And it's even more amazing than he imagined, the sound Mike makes

when he comes, like he's dying and being born again all at once, and he still keeps moving even as he spills between them. Mike's orgasm triggers his own, Harvey burying his face in the crook of Mike's neck in the aftermath, completely exhausted and sated.

Mike kisses the top of his head briefly, and he carefully extracts himself from Harvey, but was clearly more exhausted than he realized, because his legs give out on him and he collapses onto the bed. Harvey just looks at him and they both start laughing. Harvey can't help it, following the length of this body and pressing a fond kiss on his lips.

Harvey wakes to a blaring alarm, and he quickly reaches behind him and turns it off. When he turns back to Mike he's stirring slightly, but doesn't wake. Harvey lies with him for a few more moments, wishing more than anything he could just stay here in bed with Mike all day long.

But as much as he wants to he really can't, so after pressing a lingering kiss to the back of Mike's neck he gingerly extracts himself from the bed. He showers quickly, then heads to the walk-in to get dressed. By the time he returns to the bedroom, shoes in one hand and suit jacket in another, Mike has woken.

"Good morning," Harvey says, sitting on the edge of the bed to tie his shoes.

"Morning," Mike mumbles, still clearly half asleep.

Task done, Harvey stands and looks across the bed at Mike, who is just staring serenely at him. "Sorry, but I've got to get in to work."

"Who understands better than me?" Mike replies with an easy smile. But then he sobers, pulling the cover back. "I suppose I should go too."

"Stay," Harvey says quickly. "I mean, if you want to, you can stay as long as you like."

Mike sits slowly and asks, "What if I never want to leave?" The words were tentative, like he's afraid of the answer, as if he's unsure what happens next, as though he has no idea that Harvey is so far gone on Mike he can't even see back to where this road started.

"Sounds good to me," Harvey says easily, grinning brightly, and it's as near to a declaration as either of them have gotten but given Mike's reaction he thinks he can absolutely read between the lines. He leans over and kisses Mike, and when he tries to pull away Mike wraps a hand around the back of his neck to keep him there. Harvey chuckles against his lips, lets Mike prevent him from leaving for a few moments before he reluctantly pulls away.

Harvey starts to leave, but before he makes it to the doorway he remembers something. "Oh, by the way," he says, turning back to Mike. "The Pearson Hardman Christmas party is next week. Wanna be my plus one?"

Mike laughs softly. "Always."

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